

How to... make a good first impression

Posture, expression, eye contact - all have a bearing on how you are perceived. Audrey Macnaughton, director of HR at Training and Development Consultancy Macnaughton McGregor Ltd, advises on how to ensure your first impression is a good one.



Audrey Macnaughton,

DO YOU ever make up your mind about someone before they have even said a word to you? Do you ever make assumptions about people even though you have only known them for a few minutes?

Of course you do. We all make assumptions about people, especially in those first few critical moments. The trouble is those first impressions can last.

Statistics show that if the first impression that we make is a negative one, then we only have a 15 per cent chance of turning it round to be positive. The reason for this is that once we have a negative opinion it's human nature to seek out or notice information that proves our view.

So when we are in the position of making that first impression, what can we do to make sure it's a positive one?

When thinking of how we come across to others, it's tempting to start on what we say and how we engage in conversation, but we need to go back a few steps. People will form opinions even before you have uttered a word and within about 90 seconds of the first meeting they will have formed a pretty firm opinion. It's therefore worth thinking about the visual impression we make.

Of course there's a lot we can't change about our overall appearance but if we want to improve our presence or increase our influencing power, there is also quite a lot we can change. First of all it's worth being aware of your posture.

Do you hold yourself in an upright, confident way or through your posture and gestures do you come across as hesitant or lacking in confidence?

Give it a smile: making a good first impression counts.

Someone who is lacking in confidence tends to make themselves smaller by being hunched, holding their hands and arms close to their body and maybe dipping their head down.

Try to become more aware of your posture habits and make small adjustments such as standing with your feet more squarely beneath you, shoulders

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back rather than hunched, more open and relaxed arm movements and maintaining eye contact with others.

Making even the smallest adjustments to your posture can help enormously with how confident you look and because the body and mind are linked, physical changes will also help you to start feeling more confident.

Similarly you can help your body language to improve by making a change to your thoughts. If you

think you are confident and focus your mind on your positive attributes then you are more likely to look and act in a confident way.

In most business situations, when you are meeting people for the first time, there is the expectation that you will need to shake hands with others. Have you ever had feedback on how your handshake feels to the other person? When we are carrying out influencing and rapport building courses, one of the popular sessions is the short one on handshakes. It's always time well spent as people rarely get feedback on this fundamental gesture. Through discussion and practice we can make subtle adjustments to improve the image being portrayed, to help people to come across as more confident or to scale back from being overpowering.

The final key point on your visual image is your facial expression. Again, the expression you have is largely dictated by the thoughts in your head so make sure you work on thinking positively and confidently. However, you may want to consider whether you have tendencies to frown, perhaps when listening, or looking distracted, perhaps when thinking. If this is the case it could be affecting how you build rapport in the first few minutes of meeting someone, so try to become more aware of what you are doing subconsciously and make small adjustments.

Turning our attention to what you say, remember that, even though people will deny it, they generally like to talk about themselves. A captive and interested audience is fantastic! So rather than dominating the conversation, ask questions, listen properly to the reply and build on what they say to either ask a follow up question or put your point across.

It can be difficult to make changes to habits of a lifetime but through raising your awareness, getting objective feedback and making subtle adjustments, you can increase your chances of making positive first impressions which, let's face it, is much easier than trying to change someone's mind.

For more information, contact Macnaughton McGregor Ltd on (0191) 209 3362, email enquiries@2macs.com or log on to www.2macs.com